Podium Perspective:
Whitney Young and the Black Architectural Imagination

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Abstract

This essay considers a speech delivered by Whitney M. Young Jr. in 1968 at the American Institute of Architects' annual conference. The essay argues that Young's call for greater diversity and for greater engagement with African American neighborhoods across cities in the U.S. crystalized concepts such as affirmative action and community participation that were not yet named as such, but would become emulated in the three decades that followed. Young's speech provides new insight into how architecture might engage in conversations around race and the politics of injustice. By focusing on an important Civil Rights leader, the essay highlights the relationship between race and architecture – not only as it existed in 1968 – asking how the discipline can cultivate a contemporary concept of a critical theory of race and architecture.

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In the summer of 1968, Whitney Young addressed an audience of mostly white architects at the annual convention for the American Institute of Architects (AIA, 2019). Young, a Black social worker raised in Kentucky, had developed a reputation as the charismatic leader of the National Urban League, well-known for their advocacy work against racial discrimination of African Americans since 1911 (Wood, 1924: 117-26). Young began with a critique of architecture as a white-led profession, and highlighted the profession's pattern of discriminating against racial minorities. "You are not a profession that has distinguished itself by your social and civic contributions to the cause of civil rights," he said. It was understandable that Young questioned architecture's efforts (or ignorance) toward racial inclusivity. From his vantage point, the architecture community visibly lacked diversity:

One need only take a casual look at this audience to see that we have a long way to go in this field of integration of the architects. I almost feel like Mr. Stanley looking for Dr. Livingston–in reverse–in Africa. I think I did see one and wanted to rush up and say: Dr. Livingston, I presume!

Indeed, Black representation within the AIA was low (a problem that persists today). However, Young's observation was less a reflection on how Black architects have historically been underrepresented in the profession, but rather a critique of who the architectural community *claimed* to represent.[1]
"The disinherited, the disenfranchised, the poor" and more specifically, the "black poor in this country," Young was sure, were not the architect's clients. As he saw it, architects were the "silent partners" in the design of segregated public housing, and their involvement with the aggressive building tactics of urban renewal – a multi-billion dollar federal project comprised of land seizure, displacement, clearance – functioned at the scale of designing housing and inserting low-cost, minimal design development with spare outfitting. On the whole, the profession's preoccupation with fees and a client-focused financial logic had impoverished the profession's social relevance. Even when architecture's accreditation and regulation boards stepped in to address standards for public health and welfare, their own stringent codes actually encouraged the separation between architect-as-designer and architect-as-builder. Conditions

which, in their accumulation, created a profession that was thoroughly complicit in a culture of racial oppression.

The AIA regarded Whitney Young's speech as a crucible moment in the history of architecture that, in their words, "woke architecture up" (AIA, 2019). While the importance of this moment is hardly debatable, I revisit Young's speech to ask how his evaluation of the profession assumed that architecture could be redirected to different ends. In what follows, I evaluate how Young's speech – especially his characterization of the profession of architectural practice – addressed how the broader culture of architecture could join the fight for equal status and equal rights for Black Americans. At first glance, his speech may be regarded as a set of descriptions that account for specific design features of tenement housing. But a close reading reveals how Young carved a more fulsome framing. In detailing the lineaments of public housing projects, he made clear how and why public housing's most obvious limitation was in fact racial, pointing out that the utopian vision of architectural modernism had failed to accommodate the most precarious groups living in the U.S. Revisiting Young's speech provides an opportunity to recalibrate him in the history of architecture that expands his significance beyond AIA's most recent claim.

1968 reverberates as a moment of incredible racial tension, and the fact that Young found himself in front of the audience at an important architectural conference may serve as an essential guide to the history of a discipline that has seldom understood, let alone considered, its relationship to the politics of race in America. He is a figure that allows the profession to be seen clearly, to elucidate the degree of complicity, but also to understand how it could be instrumental in the good fight. Young was a leader in both community-based and community-control planning circles, but to the architectural profession he was a contingent figure. His contingency to the profession allowed for a clarity of vision and belief in change that few exhibited in those years.

By the time he delivered his AIA speech in 1968, Young already exercised a profound influence on white corporate leaders, Civil Rights organizations, and had established trust and credibility with Black Power leaders across the country. He had built an exceptionally effective dual identity for the League, one that both enhanced its identity as a social service

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agency while increasing its visibility as a leader in the Civil Rights movement.

In 1963, he spoke in support of the Birmingham campaign for equal rights alongside James Farmer and Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, founder of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), respectively. In that same year he enlisted the League's financial support for what would become A. Philip Randolph's March on Washington. Like these and other leading Civil Rights organizations, such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the League pursued equal rights for Black Americans in education, employment and social services. Desegregating schools and addressing civil liberties were increasingly common themes in Civil Rights movements, but unique to Young and the League was how he emphasized combatting the racial inequality that pervaded urban centers.

Described by the historian Dennis Dickerson as a "militant mediator" and "consummate powerbroker," Young single-handedly brought millions of dollars to the League by building its connections to philanthropic organizations, from the Ford to the Rockefeller Foundations, who were launching experimental programs to study cities deemed in crisis. His relationship with the Ford Foundation opened doors for the League to receive federal funds, and in 1965 Young was hired to lead a secret task force under the auspices of the Johnson Administration's burgeoning Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), where he helped HUD secretary Robert C. Weaver shape the implementation plan and operational goals of a new federal program called the 'Demonstration Cities and Metropolitan Development Act,' the most popular aspect being the Model Cities program (Dickerson, 1998: 3).

Young's abilities seemed instinctive. He was able to seamlessly flow between white business men, government leaders, as well as with working-class Blacks in major metropolitan cities on a daily basis. As Dickerson sees him, Young, like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., had "as much tangible black support as his colleague in the SCLC." Both men were expert negotiators and organizers, but Young in particular wanted to shift the League to become what Dickerson explains to be less of an "ambassador's role." By the late sixties, as Black

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power ideologies began to gain momentum, Young sought to "assume the position of facilitator and empower ghetto blacks," a philosophy he adopted from the Black Power ethos of self-determination (Dickerson, 1998: 5). It is true that much of the audience at the AIA convention may not have understood the weight of Young's accomplishments, but they must have perceived his invitation as timely. Young's address was delivered during an atmosphere of national grief: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated on April 4, less than two months prior to the conference, while Senator Robert F. Kennedy was shot two weeks earlier on June 5. "Race riots" had erupted in cities across the U.S. demonstrating the problem of racial inequality that dominated urban life in late sixties America. Delivered in roughly three parts, Young seemingly organized his speech to follow rather closely around what I call the holy trinity of architecture. I use this term in reference to the three coordinates that make up the field of architecture: architecture as a profession, architecture as a broad culture, architecture as building. Young captured these attributes in an exceptional way, realizing the unique moment when the goals for architecture's three coordinates triangulated around public housing.

The construction of public housing began as a federally sponsored program under the Housing Division, established within President Roosevelt's Public Works Administration (PWA). As part of the 1933 National Industrial Recovery Act, the PWA was responsible for much of the country's large-scale infrastructure projects from dams, highways, hospitals and schools. When it came to housing, while the PWA claimed "humanitarian urgency" in the production of "safe and sanitary" housing, its primary approach to building public housing mirrored its industrial projects—undergirded by the philosophy to construct, reconstruct, alter and repair (Vale, 2009: 168). The PWA viewed housing experiments in construction methods or design innovation that considered human needs or desires as all together secondary to its primary objective to kick start a depressed construction industry (Vale, 2009). This context set the stage for the profession of architecture (coordinate one), to declare itself as a specific kind of expert in the development of modern urbanism and self-positing themselves as a cultural authority (coordinate two), on all things at a variety of scales from "the spoon to the city." The building

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(coordinate three), was a product of what happened when these aspirations materialized in physical building and into a new building typology: American public housing. Architects raced to take advantage of the PWA housing funds, encouraged by the thought of contributing to Modern architecture with the design of public housing (Cuff, 2000). Yet the social vision for American public housing intersected directly with the overt endurance of Jim Crow. For Young, no mythology behind second-wave-modernism could have been more bankrupt than the alleged utopian promises of modernist public housing projects.

I can't help but wonder about an architect that builds some of the public housing that I see in the cities of this country. How he could even compromise his own profession and his own sense of values to have built 35- or 40-storey buildings, these vertical slums, not even put a restroom in the basement and leave enough recreational space for about 10 kids when there must be 5,000 in the building. That architects as a profession wouldn't as a group stand up and say something about this, is disturbing to me.

The architects practicing in this way were neglecting their ethical responsibility. By calling themselves "designers and not builders," Young saw this claim as a clever "escape hatch" for architects to ignore racial injustice and practice racial indifference. Wasn't their an "ethical code" that architects followed? Didn't the profession follow strict mandates set and regulated by the National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB) and NCARB, The National Council of Architectural Registration Boards and ACSA, The Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture – organizing boards who set the standards for the education and licensure of architects?

According to NCARB's mission: to protect the public health and welfare of the general public by producing safety standards, the idea of public health, safety and welfare were envisioned by NCARB as central to the architect's training (NCARB, 2018). Licensure exams tested a candidate's knowledge of safety and accessibility such as the minimum height, rise and depth required for hand railings or windows or the standard number of bathroom facilities required for one dwelling unit. What Young was alluding to was: if safety and daily concerns of everyday life were codified through a set of standards and guidelines, then how

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could a "14-story tenement house with no elevator [where] little boys can't quite make it" to the bathroom be approved for building? The pointed realism of Young's observation was simple: building standards should be no different when building for the poor. The architects who tasked themselves with building post-war America were similar to the policymakers, city officials and developers: white, middle-class men. The architects did not have clear connections, and perhaps only fleeting concerns for the safety and daily lives of those who lived at the other end of a well-defined class spectrum. In highlighting this connection, Young was one of the first to point out that architects were not willing to acknowledge the fact that poverty in the U.S. was racialized, and that this tendency lay in the grim reality of segregated public housing. Young saw professional architects – knowingly or not – implicated in the white urban enterprise that marked renewal through the sixties. He saw Black Americans living disproportionately in poverty without equal access to employment, healthcare and education as whites. Young illustrated his point by referring to the afterlife of slavery:[2]

The slums are in the Harlems of our community where black people live who have been in this country four-hundred years, whose blood, sweat and tears have gone to build this country, who gave it two-hundred and fifty years of free labor and another hundred years of cheap labor. They are the ones who live in the slums and who are unemployed.

Young's terminology is important, and deserves a close and historical look. The term "slum" was a politically elastic term; both a descriptor of a specific place in the way Young used the word, and also, in 1968, code for anywhere Black people lived.[3] Federal documents strategically replaced the word 'negro' with 'slum' – no-longer written as "negro-removal," but "slum removal," "slum upgrading," or "slum clearance." And in this way, renewal's strategy to address American racial politics involved displacing the social underpinnings of racism with physical policies. Whether he considered the politics of HUD and the urban programs associated with it is an open question. Indications of his suspicions of the government surface from time to time. "Even the Government participated" in segregating the city, he explained:

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3 – As early as 1896, W.E.B. Du Bois explored these complex social problems that he saw were simulta-neously being spa-tialized and named as slum districts. He cautioned against reducing the "Negro question" to slum districts, for "the slum is not a simple fact, it is a symptom and that to know the removable causes of the Negro slums of Philadelphia requires a study that takes one far beyond the slum districts." Du Bois, W. E. B. (1973).

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Young also attacked the private market and architects, who he saw to be equally responsible for racially segregating the city.

They said [there] must be compatible neighborhoods for FHA mortgages, homogenous neighborhoods. The Federal Government participated in building the nice middle-class housing in the suburbs, putting all the public housing in the central city.

For K-Sue Park, in *Money, Mortgages, and the Conquest of America* (2016), the history of American colonial expansion depended on the American colonial mort-gage, what she calls a "racial mortgage," defined as an financial innovation "rooted fundamentally in racial violence, seizure of land, [and] seizure of people" (Park, 2019). Similarly, the Federal Housing Admin-istration (FHA) Mortgage was not race-neutral. The history of redlining not only acquired legitimacy by depending on FHA loans. Subdivisions for white fam-ilies were subsidized by FHA mortgage-backed loans for developers that explicitly restricted sales to Afri-can Americans, under the clause: "incompatible racial groups should not be permitted to live in the same communities" (The Fair Housing Center of Greater Boston, 1934). These same regulations insisted that African American neighborhoods were unfit and too risky to insure. Young was alert to the ways exclusion-ary housing policies were forms of racial violence that were normalized through FHA mortgage schemes. "It took a great deal of skill and creativity and imagi-nation to build the kind of situation we have" Young noted, "and it is going to take skill and imagination and creativity to change it."
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[...] you are key people in the planning of our cities today. You share the responsibility for the mess we are in terms of the white noose around the central city. It didn't just happen. We didn't just suddenly get this situation. It was carefully planned. I went back recently and looked at ads when they first started building subdivisions in this country. The first new subdivision – easy access to town, good shopping cen-ters, good schools, no Negroes, no Jews allowed –that was the first statement. Then they decided in New York that that was cutting the market too close, so they said the next day, "No Negroes allowed." And then they got cute when they thought everybody had the message, and they said "restricted, exclu-sive neighborhood, homogenous neighborhood".

The significance of Young's words was that he made clear architecture, both as a profession, the architects themselves as representatives of a broader architectural culture, and the regulating body of architects that was the AIA, played an explicit role in making space itself a privileged space of whiteness. Young knew how to show men of a certain kind of privilege, what the racism looked like, and he approached the architects in the room, no differently. And what we're seeing at this point is the very early formation of institutional language that will be taken up by lawyer and legal theorist, Cheryl Harris thirty years later.

For Young, segregated neighborhoods demonstrated what Harris would later define as "Whiteness as Property." (Harris, 1995) By prioritizing "racially contingent forms of property and property rights," Harris posits that "even as legal segregation was overturned, whiteness as property continued to serve as a barrier to effective change as the system of racial classification operated to protect entrenched power." These were the same regulatory devices that set to preserve the purity of a neighborhood, "the good shopping centers, good schools, no Negroes" that Young observes in advertisements to sell new subdivisions. For Harris, these were precisely "the set of assumptions, privileges and benefits that accompany the status of being white have become a valuable asset that whites sought to protect." These assumptions, as made clear by the adverts, gave birth simultaneously to the suburban tract home and tenement housing. Young equates this directly to the architectural premises that provided a format for that package; making clear to his audience their participation in advancing white racial hegemony by making explicit the idea that racial inequality was deeply bound up in America with building.

At other times, Young appears to believe that the federal government improved its renewal programming with a more precise and coherent program called Model Cities.

As a profession, you ought to be taking stands [...] If you don't as architects stand up and endorse Model Cities and appropriations, if you don't speak out for rent supplements or the housing bill calling for a million homes [...] deliberately seek to bring in minority people who have been discrimi-

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nated against in many cases, either kept out because of your indifference or couldn't make it [...] then you will have done a disservice to the memory of John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Bob Kennedy and most of all, to yourselves.

The Model Cities program was implemented in 1966 and lasted until 1974. It sought to slow down renewal's emphasis on physical development by supporting social processes, in particular by mandating community participation in the development process. This approach, lessened the deep contradiction of federal renewal plans, which boasted redevelopment and advancement, yet excluded many people of color. One can argue that Young did not seem to realize that after architecture failed American cities with their ideology of public housing as "towers in the park," the broad field of architecture may have been reluctant to further participate in federal urban programs. Many historians have marked the year 1968 as a key moment in the discipline's history when growing demands for engagement in the changing landscape of American cities pushed architecture into self-referential and increasingly conceptual work untethered from building. This disciplinary anxiety, on the occasion of Young's speech, did not seem to matter. Young's main concern was affirming architecture's commitment to the improvement of Black lives. If in the summer of 1968, he saw architecture as "most distinguished by your thunderous silence and your complete irrelevance" then there was still an opportunity for architecture to reassert itself to tackle racial conflict in urban areas. To keep Young relevant for the discipline means keeping architecture attentive to the ways in which racial profiling, policing, and violence shift shape, and become spatialized. Architecture was not at a complete loss then, nor is it today. Young's sensibility perceived how the broader culture of architecture could be used as a tool for Black liberation that makes him worthy of our continued attention.

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